



Office of Greenways & Trails

Florida Circumnavigational Saltwater Paddling Trail

Segment 16

Biscayne Bay

Emergency contact information:

911

Monroe County Sheriff's Office: Upper Keys (305) 853-3266

Miami-Dade Police Department: 305-4-POLICE

Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission 24-hour wildlife emergency/boating under the influence hotline: 1-888-404-3922 or *FWC

FPTA Region: H

Begin: John Pennekamp Coral Reef State Park

End: Oleta River State Park

Distance: 64.6 miles

Duration: 5-6 days

Special Considerations: Heavy winds and storms may prove challenging in open water areas. Weekend boat traffic can be heavy, especially in the narrow northern section of the bay. Day two will be a highly interesting though challenging day in terms of mileage.

Introduction

Paddlers can follow in the wake of Tequesta Indians, Bahamian tree-cutters, pirates, wreckers, smugglers, fortune hunters, millionaires, and several United States presidents who have utilized Biscayne Bay for their livelihood or as their playground. The numerous islands and keys reveal a surprising wildness, especially due to their proximity to Miami, and several spoil islands have been restored and turned into tropical oases. Much of the

bay is shallow, so paddlers can largely avoid boating lanes and hug the shorelines, being wary of large wakes.

Since the heart of Biscayne Bay is a wide watery expanse, paddlers should pay close attention to weather conditions. To quote from the [Biscayne National Park](#) website: “Some days, Biscayne Bay’s shallow waters are glassy smooth, a window on another world. Other times, the wind whistles and whips, creating white waves that bite like teeth at an angry sky.”

Several routes can be taken through this segment, depending upon your desire and prevailing winds. This draft will focus on one main route since campsites are currently limited to just a few sites.

Three Florida state parks are included in this segment: [John Pennekamp](#), [Bill Baggs Cape Florida](#), and [Oleta River](#). The route traverses the [Biscayne Bay Aquatic Preserve](#), an area that includes extensive mangrove forests, seagrass meadows, estuarine and hard-bottom communities, and a diverse array of marine life. At least 512 fish species occur in the bay and more than 800 benthic organisms. Manatees, sea turtles, and a wide variety of birds can be seen.

Paddlers will also enjoy [Biscayne National Park](#), the largest marine park in the national park system, with more than 180,000 acres of islands, mangrove shorelines, and undersea life.

Regarding primitive campsites outlined in this guide, users are required to keep these sites clean and follow all regulations in order for them to remain open for paddlers. All human waste must be packed out and properly disposed of according to [Leave No Trace Principles](#). A reliable GPS unit is a must to safely follow the route and find campsites. Bug repellent is essential even in winter, although biting insects are more prevalent in warm months. Temperatures can be surprisingly cold in the winter months also.

1. John Pennekamp Coral Reef State Park to Garden Cove Bougainville campsite, 4.9 miles

In this section, you’ll begin paddling through one of the most pristine areas in coastal South Florida. Green mangrove-lined shorelines greet paddlers along with shallow patch reefs with their colorful fish.

From the Pennekamp kayak launch site (just over the wooden bridge on your left along Largo Sound), paddle north through North Sound Creek and skirt the inside of Rattlesnake Key. The Port Bougainville/Garden Cove campsite at [Dagny Johnson Key Largo Hammock Botanical State Park](#) has a composting toilet and fire ring. Paddlers

wanting to camp must pack everything in and out; there is limited access to Key Largo. Arrangements must be made in advance by calling the Ranger Station at Dagny Johnson Key Largo Hammock Botanical State Park, 305-676-3777. The site is only available to CT paddlers.

The name of Garden Cove dates back to the 1830s. A Keys ship captain, John Whalton, and his crew maintained a garden of fruits and vegetables in the area to augment their intermittent supply shipments. When Whalton and four crew members paddled ashore to tend the garden on June 26, 1837, Seminole Indians surprised them and killed Whalton and one crew member.

2. Garden Cove Bougainville Campsite to Elliott Key, 24.5 miles

Paddling along the shore, you'll eventually pass the Ocean Reef Club, an exclusive members-only community that does not allow uninvited guests by sea or land.

For an ideal rest stop, follow the channel markers into Palo Alto Key and take the first tidal creek on the right. The rest stop is a short way up the creek on the right in a tiny cove. Use your GPS unit to verify. Please do not explore the area as this is a protected hammock site. Poisonwood trees in the area are distinguishable by black splotches of poisonous sap on the smooth trunks. Most people are sensitive and can develop skin rashes.

As you pass Old Rhodes Key, you'll notice the bleached bones of mangroves as this area received a direct hit from Hurricane Andrew in 1992.

Porgy Key is an interesting point of interest as this is the home site of the Jones family. Of African descent, they settled the key in 1897 and raised pineapples and limes to sell in Key West. Eventually, only one member of the family remained on the island, Sir Lancelot Jones. He worked as a sponger and fishing guide, having the distinction of taking four different United States presidents bonefishing. Known fondly as "the philosopher of Porgy Key," Sir Lancelot was moved from the island at age 94 when Hurricane Andrew was bearing down. Today, visitors can view the concrete foundations of his house and that of his family and picture the life they once lived.

The 550-acre Jones Lagoon just south of the house site is worthy of exploration since it is a shallow and clear marine wonderland. The non-profit Biscayne National Park Institute leads daily guided paddling trips through the lagoon.

Across from Porgy Key is a Biscayne National Park day-use area on Adams Key where you can have a picnic and use the restrooms.

Overnight camping is on the bay side roughly halfway up Elliott Key. You can tie up your kayaks on the low docks that are generally reserved for dinghies. Regulations forbid kayakers to land on the swimming beach.

Elliott Key has restrooms, picnic tables, grills, cold showers, and fresh water. A group camping site is on the ocean side about half a mile across the island. You can stretch your legs on numerous trails, exploring this scenic island. One seven-mile trail cuts lengthwise through the center of the island through a tropical hardwood hammock. Originally, this trail was a 150-foot wide swath cut by a former landowner just before the National Park Service took control of the island. Known as Spite Highway, the swath has since grown back to become a pleasing canopied trail. A nature trail on the ocean side will enable you to view sea grapes, black mangroves, bay cedars, buttonwoods, and other subtropical plants. Camping on both Elliott Key and Boca Chita Key is on a first-come, first-served basis for a modest fee.

3. Elliott Key to Boca Chita Key, 5 miles

This is a short day, certainly optional, to a premier campsite on Boca Chita Key, also managed by the National Park Service. The landing site is on the north side of the 32-acre island. There are picnic tables, grills, and restrooms, but no fresh water. Take time to explore “the little lighthouse that isn’t,” a lighthouse built illegally from native coral rock by Mark Honeywell in the 1940s for his personal navigation landmark. He was forced to permanently extinguish the beacon when it was deemed an uncharted hazard to navigation in the area.

4. Boca Chita Key to Matheson Hammock, 11.9 miles

Leaving Boca Chita towards Matheson Hammock County Park, it is a straight shot northwest across Biscayne Bay. The CT campsite is on the southeast side of the overflow parking lot, and a short walk to the bathrooms. Be sure to get permission before camping here. A permit is required. Call ahead of time 305-230-3033 (9 am- 5 pm). Please follow “Leave No Trace” principles. There is a full-service marina, a snack bar, and a restaurant on site.

Camping is for CTers only, and only for one night and the group size is limited to a maximum of four tents with eight kayaks. Please review camping permit rules: MIAMI-DADE COUNTY PARK & RECREATION and OPEN SPACES DEPARTMENT COASTAL PRIMITIVE CAMPING PERMIT RULES
Primitive campsites have been established at the south picnic area of Matheson Hammock Park and Marina and the south-east corner of Homestead Bayfront Park for use by paddlers on the Florida Circumnavigational Saltwater Paddling Trail Segment 16

– Biscayne Bay (reference maps). The campsites are limited to a capacity of 8 people and 4 tents on a first-come, first-serve basis and to no more than one night per week, per person. Availability is subject to weather conditions, tide fluctuations, special events and construction projects. Access to amenities will be limited after the park hours of operation. Primitive camping will be in areas of uneven ground and limited lighting.

Primitive camping reservation requests may be made in person or by email with no less than 48 hours prior to the desired camping dates and a Park Link account will be required. Paddlers may call the Matheson Hammock Park office (305) 665-5475 or the Homestead Bayfront Park office (305) 230- 3033 during operating hours 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. to verify availability or to cancel any reservation. Paddlers must possess an approved permit, valid identification with the arrival date to use this primitive camping site. The permittees must have the permit in their possession while camping in the park. This permit is not transferable.

General Rules:

1. Parks are open from 6:00 a.m. to sunset.
2. Permittees must comply with all applicable County, State and Federal laws, rules, and regulations. The permittee will be responsible for the conduct of the participants and their guests.
3. No swimming is allowed in marina waterways.
4. No open fires allowed.
5. Area must be left clean and free of trash. miamidade.gov
6. Pets are not allowed.
7. Do not feed wildlife.
8. After park closure, loitering, rideshare / taxi or deliveries are not allowed.
9. For the safety of the permittee the primitive campsite will be closed during thunder and lightning. All outdoor activities will be cancelled, and visitors must seek shelter immediately.
10. Permittee is responsible for any damages made to park property.
11. Failing to comply with all Primitive Camping Rules and Regulations and General Park Regulations as set forth by the Miami-Dade County Parks, Recreation and Open Spaces Department may lead to being denied future use of the facilities.

Park rules and regulations: <https://www.miamidade.gov/global/recreation/rules-regulations> Matheson Hammock Park and Marina Phone: (305) 665-5475 Email: Matheson.marina@miamidade.gov Requested Date: _____

Arrival Time: _____ Permittee Guests: _____

_____ Homestead

Bayfront Park and Herbert Hoover Marina Phone: (305) 230-3033 Email: carlos.cruzfelix@miamidade.gov Requested Date: _____

Arrival Time: _____ Permittee Guests: _____

_____ By my signature, I acknowledge that I have received, read, understand, and agree to the Miami-Dade County Parks, Recreation and Open Spaces Primitive Camping Rules and Regulations. _____

_____ Permittee Name

5. Matheson Hammock County Park to Oleta River State Park, 19.4 miles

Leaving Matheson Hammock County Park, paddle north along the coast and you will pass under the 913 bridge that goes out to Virginia Key. After that, you will pass under 3 bridges close together that are along the west end of Government Cut, and the docking area for cruise ships and commercial shipping. Just beyond that on the east side of the channel is Teacher's Island.

Teacher's Island is the first of several spoil islands that the City of Miami has restored into tropical paradises with native vegetation. Most are nearly surrounded by riprap (large rocks) to stem erosion, but small beaches or docks on each island offer handy landing spots. With the exception of Bird Key, which is a bird rookery and off-limits, each island has a picnic area, and some have nature trails and shelters. No ~~long-term~~ camping is permitted, but the islands make great stopovers for circumnavigation paddlers as long as No Trace Principles are utilized. Nearby parks on the mainland, such as Morningside Park near Morningside Island, offer public restrooms. Bear in mind that on most weekends, the islands are very popular with boaters.

In exploring the islands, try to identify native species that have been planted on these once barren isles of sand. Species may include bay cedar, sabal and coconut palms, sea lavender, sea grape, sea oats, gumbo limbo, Jamaica dogwood, and mahogany.

The bay gradually narrows as you head north until you'll see the huge area of mature mangrove forests, framed by large buildings. This is Oleta River State Park, resembling a coastal Central Park in an urban setting. Exceeding a thousand acres, this is the largest urban park in the state. The upland areas were built from spoil material from dredging and are now best known for premier mountain biking. Wet areas mostly consist of mangroves, though it is interesting to note that sawgrass once dominated these sites. A 1926 hurricane opened a channel across from the park, allowing more salinity into the northern bay, enabling salt-tolerant mangroves to take hold. Dredging now keeps the Baker's Haulover Inlet open.

Paddlers can enjoy the park by landing at the designated CT campsite adjacent to the park cabins and restrooms, which is along a tidal creek 0.5 miles past the state park beach. The campsite has a picnic table and fire ring, and the bathrooms have hot showers. Contact the Park Manager for permission prior to camping at 305-919-1846. It is against park regulations to land a craft on the beach as it may pose hazardous for bathers swimming underwater. Visitors need to pay a day-use fee in the iron ranger near the landing spot by the restrooms, or by hiking to the entrance station. The fee is \$5 per adult per night. You must have the exact change. Another option is to enjoy the luxuries of one of the park's cabins for a fee. Advanced reservations are recommended, especially on weekends.

If you hike out past the entrance station (0.4 miles) and the park gate (0.8 miles), there are several restaurants close by. More restaurants and a shopping mall are one block east. One mile west along the river, at the bridge, is the park's visitor services provider—[Oleta River Outdoor Center](#) and the [Blue Marlin Fish House](#). Kayak rentals are available.

As you enjoy Oleta River State Park, it is difficult to imagine that millions of people live within a 20-mile radius. Like many parts of this segment, Oleta is a natural oasis in an urban setting.